Unlikely Model

By William V. Shannon

WASHINGTON — The odyssey of Richard Nixon has finally brought him to Yalta.

In substantive terms, the occasion is bizarre. With the economy wracked by inflation and his Administration ravaged by Watergate, Mr. Nixon hurries off on trips that may be unnecessary and are certainly not urgent. He is like a homeowner trying to distract the attention of insurance investigators from his burn-out house by staging fireworks displays on his neighbor's lawn.

In symbolic terms, however, the journey to Yalta is fitting. There Franklin D. Roosevelt met with Stalin in 1945 and made his last major effort at Soviet-American understanding before his death. Roosevelt, far more than Mr. Nixon may realize or wish to admit, has been the unlikely model for many of this President's maneuvers and devices.

Mr. Nixon was 20 years old when Roosevelt entered office and 32 when he died. For politically conscious young men of those years, Roosevelt dominated their imaginations and placed his mark upon their minds. He was a man of historic size. Whether they hero-worshiped him as did Lyndon Johnson or professed to disapprove of him as does Mr. Nixon, he was *the* President.

Roosevelt invented the modern Presidency. Mr. Nixon is bringing it down in ruins. From one perspective, his career can be seen as a vulgar parody of F.D.R.

After he made his Checkers speech in 1952, he likened it to Roosevelt's "My Little Dog Fala" speech to the Teamsters union in the 1944 campaign. Roosevelt had been heavily sardonic, while Mr. Nixon was mawkish.

As President, Mr. Nixon tried to hasten the emergence of a new Republican majority and thereby reverse Roosevelt's triumph in converting the Democrats from a chronic minority into a long-term majority party.

Roosevelt relished surprises. Important projects such as the plan to enlarge the Supreme Court were conceived secretly with the aid of only one or two trusted advisers. Similarly, Mr. Nixon nurtured his change of policy toward Mainland China without taking Congress, the public or this country's allies into his confidence. His dominant motive for so much secrecy, was his desire to spring a stunning surprise.

President Roosevelt tended to use his Secretaries of State—Cordell Hull and later Edward R. Stettinius—as public relations false fronts. During World War II he relied upon Harry Hopkins, his personal confidant, to conduct sensitive diplomatic missions. Hopkins' wartime role closely parallels that of Henry A. Kissinger in his pre-Secretary of State days. Intervening Presidents made no comparable sustained use of a single trusted emissary operating outside of public scrutiny and Congressional control.

"Meeting at the summit" — the phrase was Churchill's but it was Roosevelt whose unannounced trips abroad established this bewitching image of world leadership for a generation of Americans emerging from a long tradition of national isolation. Casablanca . . . Teheran . . . Cairo . . . Yalta. The place names of those wartime meetings still have a ring of glamour for Americans old enough to remember the news bulletins about them.

Those conferences were necessary to reach military decisions and keep alive an Alliance of suspicious partners. No such necessities compel Mr. Nixon's peregrinations. The agreements have been worked out in advance and do not require a meeting of heads of state for their ceremonial signing.

The conferences have become their own excuse for being. Only the "atmospherics" matter—the airport embraces, the posing for group photographs, the appearances before small, sanitized audiences of cheering Russians, the "spontaneous" mingling with street crowds, the farewell platitudes on Russian television.

Mr. Nixon seems not to realize that the summit rituals have grown stale with repetition. After so much cynicism, deceit and inconclusive posturing, most people are hard put to know what, if anything, these meetings portend. Even the familiar clatter about possible "secret agreements" sounds like lines left over from some other play.

Is that Khrushchev banging his shoe? Was it Harry Truman who said, "I can get along with good old Joe"? Why is Richard Nixon shaking his finger under someone's nose in that photograph and smiling in this one? Who cheated whom in that wheat deal? Where did Henry Cabot Lodge go?

Mr. Nixon, mimic to the end, imagines that he can reduce his dispirited, crime-soiled Administration by re-enacting, again and again, the dramas of dead giants. But there is no redemption or renewal in a procession to Yalta. There is only the chattering of pygmies in a void.

Russell Baker is on vacation.